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ABSTRACT

A study of formula fiction books was conducted to determine how these books fit into women's lives, what images they bring to mind, and what uses they serve. Seventy-two women from the ages of 18 to 70 read a Harlequin Romance novel by Sue Byfield. Then the group participated in several focus group discussions, a qualitative indepth technique that involved convening small groups of women, each with a moderator, for an open-ended discussion to generate hypotheses on readers' attitudes. Findings showed that women read formula fiction because it indulged their fantasies, was flexible (easy to carry and to read), provided temporary relief from the anxieties of the day and boredom, and provided new information on vocabulary and descriptions of other countries. Results indicated that the romance novels appeared to serve multiple functions determined by the readers' purposes and needs. Beyond the women's individual responses, the discussions reflected on a number of issues, such as reasons for needing to escape from the real world and the negative consequences of reading such fiction. (A demographic profile of participants and a short list of references are included.) (EL)

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The Uses of Reading Mass-Produced Romance Fiction

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Paper presented at the International
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The Uses of Reading Mass-Produced Romance Fiction

During the last several decades we have witnessed a dramatic increase in the proliferation of formula fiction books. This has been an absolute increase, not simply one proportionate to the increase in the population (Nye, 1970). Designed to appeal to a wide-scale audience, these books rely heavily on standarized formulas, stereotypic characters, and predictable plots. Of these formula books, mass produced romance fiction today represents the fastest growing genre, representing a half a billion dollar industry and expanding at a current rate of 25% a year (Jennings, 1983). There are now 140 brand-name category books produced each month ranging from 'sweet' to the more 'highly sensual' contemporary stories. According to Simon and Schuster's president, the prime target is "the woman driven crazy by her kids all day, who makes dinner for her husband and then 'escapes' into her own private time" (Sheehy, 1980).

The sentimental novel has actually flourished since the early 1900's--from the dime novel tradition, to the explosion of paperback series in the late 30's to the brand-name romances of today. Throughout these years, the formula has remained remarkably consistent. Love pulp magazines in the mid-thirties,

for example, stressed virtue, romance, and the attractions of domesticity--the novels of the 80's continue to portray courtship as the great adventure, and marriage, the reward.

The enormous appeal of these books suggests that they speak to very real problems and tensions in women's lives. A faithful reader spends at least $25.00 a month on formula fiction from an average household income of $22,000 or more (Walters, 1982). The explosion of new formula series, mail-order book clubs, 'Tupperware' style book parties indicate that these books are probably fulfilling important functions for an increasing number of women.

Very little information, however, is available on this type of reading. While studies of the informative and utilitarian functions have been analyzed in detail (Diehl and Mikulecky, 1980; Guthrie and Siefert, 1983), there is a paucity of research focusing explicitly on reading for escape or entertainment purposes. Researchers tend to derogate the value of popular fiction because it represents a form of indulgence, an effortless casual act, seldom involving overt behavioral or attitudinal changes. Responses to popular literature suggest an effect that evaporates almost as soon as the reader's eye leaves the page.

Formula fiction, nevertheless, remains a predominant form of reading. It is safe to assume that readers use these elements

for a variety of psychological and social reasons. But these issues are probably more complex than we have previously assumed. The proliferation of these materials has grown from human needs and is sustained by satisfying those needs. In this respect, these materials can be an unusually sensitive and accurate reflection of the attitudes and concerns of the society for which it is produced. How these books fit into women's lives, what images they bring to mind, what uses they serve is the subject of this investigation.

Procedure

That people read in order to satisfy certain needs is a basic assumption underlying our analysis of the functions of reading romance novels. This uses and gratifications perspective, developed through mass communications research, assumes that the individual is dynamic, possessing certain needs and consciously selecting reading materials most likely to fulfill those functions. These needs are dependent on psychological factors (i.e. intelligence, personality, attitudes) and social factors (i.e. socio-economic status, values, home environment). In this respect, the model offers an advantage over others in that it assumes that the total situation plays a role in determining the selection of materials. Since psychological and social

characteristics shape individual needs, many separate explanatory factors such as personality and motivation are taken into account.

For the purposes of this analysis, the Harlequin Romance line was selected, a more generic form of romance, one that tends to be familiar and regarded as 'within good taste' (avoiding explicit sex) to most women. These books follow a highly standardized formula. Each book includes ten to twelve chapters and averages 57,000 words or approximately 188 pages. The romances may contain elements of mystery or adventure but these are subordinate to the romance which always ends happily. The settings are exotic--the Riveria, Hawaii, the Carribean, romantized to intensify the love story.

A Harlequin Romance novel, To Be or Not to Be by Sue Byfield (No. 2529, 1983) was chosen at random as the subject of this qualitative analysis. The book followed the classic characteristics of the Harlequin formula. Stacy, the 18 year old heroine, is visiting her recently married sister, Chris, in Spain. At dinner on the first evening of her visit, Stacy meets Felipe, a tall, attractive, wealthy neighbor. After several intimate, sometimes strained encounters, they fall in love and decide to marry. Chris, however, discourages Stacy by divulging some terrible secrets of Felipe's past. Stacy runs back home to

England. Felipe finds her there desperately ill, nurses her back to health and marries her in the final chapter.

A focus group methodology, a qualitative indepth technique, was used to generate hypotheses on readers attitudes. Successfully used in market research, the method involves convening a group of respondents with a moderator, for an open-ended discussion of a product. The participants are told that they are being tape-recorded, but that all names will remain anonymous.

The discussions are held in a relaxed environment in a private home; the mood, informal to encourage respondents to talk comfortably. The interaction among the members of the group is held as a basic rationale for the method because it helps to discover the emotional framework and the goals and expectations toward a particular product. Members, therefore, are encouraged to bring up any aspect of the subject, to express their feelings, and to probe other members as well (Calder, 1977).

Experimentalists might question the generalizability of the method. Can these results, based on informal sampling and nonnumerical findings, be statistically projected to a larger universe? Focus group research does not seek to provide data for statistical analysis; rather it is intended to gather information concerning attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, often in

respondents own words. Thus it provides 'feel', 'texture', a degree of nuance which is unavailable through quantitative methods.

Women from the ages of 18-70 were recruited from a three county area in Eastern Connecticut. While not subject to rigorous sampling procedures, the focus groups were designed to be heterogeneous in character, including women of different ages, occupations, and social status. Neighbors, members of community organizations and co-workers were screened to determine if they read formula romance novels. Of the original 109 women approached, 72 women read at least one romance novel a month. At this time no attempt was made to determine other reading habits. Once the respondent qualified, our recruiting task, was simply to ask the women selected for participation in the study to read To Be or Not To Be and join a two-hour discussion group at the moderator's home. The response was generally positive. Some women suggested that the project would given them an 'excuse' to read another romance book; others looked forward to an opportunity to get together socially with other women.

Books were distributed by the moderators one week prior to the focus group meetings in the first week of May, 1984. Eight groups, ranging in size from 5-11 participants in each group participated in the study. Before the discussion sessions

actually began, a short questionnaire was distributed requesting general demographic information, leisure reading, and television viewing habits. Table 1 describes the demographic profile of the focus group participants. Generally the women were college trained, between the ages of 31-40, married, and involved in a semi-skilled or professional job outside the home. The sessions were tape-recorded with the consent of the participants. A transcript of the discussions, with all names recoded for anonymity was prepared following each session.

An Overview of the Discussions

Despite differences in the composition of the eight groups, the discussions repeatedly converged on several distinctive patterns. Unless otherwise noted, the comments and quotations illustrate dominant responses. Five categories of responses were noted: fantasy, flexibility of reading, respite, relief from boredom, and knowledge. A summary of these somewhat overlapping categories will be described, beginning with the most common responses to the less frequent. Inferences on the potential functions served by reading romance formula fiction will also be drawn.

Fantasy

Virtually throughout the discussions, there was evidence of a desire for the idealized, perfect, romantic life, without the constraints of daily chores and schedules. These fantasies generally focused on the personal characteristics of the heroine, nostalgia for days gone by, and the wish to be taken care of by others.

The fact that the major heroine was naturally beautiful brought to mind the image of the "all-around girl", a young woman who is always lovely, without being aware of it, thin, without

dieting or exercising--a woman who "could always find something to wear."

> "You know those kind of gals that can put on a pair of white duck slacks and a colorful shirt and a blazer and look like they just stepped out of Vogue Magazine, and I look--there's a ripple rolling here and there's wrinkles over here, you know? She took anything from the suitcase, flipped up the collar and looked great."

One participant described Stacy as the kind of woman "we all love to hate." The need to be young, beautiful, and naturally feminine was characterized as a genuine concern to many of the women in the discussion groups.

A number of respondents were drawn to the innocence of the heroine and her naivete in matters of romance. It brought a sense of nostalgia of the dating years, and the pleasant, hopeful feeling of meeting someone special. Several noted that these years represented the best times in their lives. Since the respondents were familiar with the formula, the story allowed them to experience the romance, yet at the same time be intellectually distanced from the heroine's difficulties and confusions.

The lack of realism in the story was a common response among the focus group participants. Stacy was too naive, and too inexperienced for the women to closely identify with her. Yet, the 'fairy tale' quality of the story appeared to meet many of

the respondents' needs. Felipe was described as the perfect man; strong, wealthy, domineering, making few demands on Stacy. He was often referred to as 'Prince Charming' or the 'Knight in Shining Armor' who would carry a woman off to a charmed life, free from responsibility and live 'happily ever after.'

> I kind of like this life. Then I wouldn't have to worry, Oh God, I got my house insurance bill this month."
>
> "For a woman, being swept away by somebody absolutely gorgeous, a rich person that's going to dote on her—that kind of appeals to me."
>
> "I feel sad, sad that Felipe will never come and sweep me away."
>
> "It's like a father figure, almost dominating you but also taking care of you. Somebody who controls your life."

The issue of control and dependence was the subject of a best-selling book The Cinderella Complex several years ago (Dowling, 1981). Like Cinderella, Dowling argues, women today are waiting for something external to transform their lives. They are caught in a crossfire between old and new social expectations—at the same time they yearn to be free, they also yearn to be taken care of by others.

This continuing conflict was clearly reflected in the focus groups. At one point in the discussion, women would describe Felipe as 'sexist', 'macho', and 'domineering'; at another time, he would be referred to as Stacy's caretaker or the 'perfect'

man. Several women, in fact, encouraged their sons and daughters to read Harlequin novels to see how women should be treated--"I would like my daughter to be protected like the men protect the women in these novels."

Flexibility of Reading

The discussions focused to a large extent on the book's flexibility; that is, its portability, proximity, and ease of reading. Positive responses were generally related to four issues: the book was short, nonmemorable, nonchallenging and easy to read.

Many of the respondents reportedly enjoyed reading as an activity but simply did not have the time. Harlequin novels, with their stipulated number of chapters and words, could be read in an evening, generally two to three hours. For working women, in particular, this limited commitment appeared to be an important issue. One professional woman who was a frequent reader commented:

> "I suffered for three months through the Thornbirds and I read it and read it. I loved it, yes, but I kept wishing it were over because there were a million other things I wanted to read. And I thought, gee whiz, I got the same romance but at half the time with Harlequin."

Reading a book that could be finished in one sitting appeared to give some women a strong sense of getting something

accomplished.

The book's nonmemorable quality was regarded as a positive factor by the majority of participants. The book could be read quickly then forgotten, again reflecting a concern for time. One woman noted that with serious materials, her mind tended to become preoccupied, connecting events, and characters with every day life. With Harlequin, however, one could become involved, but not <u>too</u> involved, "I never thought about the story again after I read it."

The predictability of the story allowed the respondents to read without much concentration. The book was often referred to as 'light' or 'fluff', a story requiring little thought. The plot and characters were quickly recognized as part of the formula enabling the reader to skim to find the parts of the story that were most appealing. One woman, for example, read the end of the book first, then the parts of the story where there were conflicts between the main characters. Another commented:

> "There's absolutely no thinking involved. You just pick one up and put it down. Especially when you don't have a lot of time to read they're ideal. There's nothing to it. You know how the book's going to end in case you lose it."

The book was also easy to read. An analysis of <u>To Be or Not To Be</u> using the Fry readability formula was 4.0 indicating the fourth grade level. Most of the women read while involved in

other activities: commuting to work, waiting in doctor's offices, or during the commercials on TV. The story was easy to follow despite interruptions and family distractions.

Books that can be read quickly and easily between other tasks were regarded positively by all members of the focus group discussions. These qualities were generally considered to be a major key to the growing popularity of brand-name romance books.

Respite

A number of women suggested that the romance book provided a temporary relief from the anxieties of the day. These responses were generally from housewives with low incomes and retired women who were primarily confined to the home. Several described the book as a tranquilizer, something to help them unwind after a hectic day:

> "If you're really feeling miserable or things are real hectic and you're not happy about anything, you can pick this up and it's pure escape."
>
> "I feel that there are times when you need to take yourself out of the home and if you can't take yourself out bodily, or maybe mentally, it's not that taxing to read Harlequin romances."
>
> "It's better than taking a couple of drinks."

Respondents described the effects of the story as a 'breath of fresh air' serving to re-establish a certain equilibrium in their lives. "When you come back you feel you can cope better

with whatever you have to face." Because of their involvement in the story, most felt it more relaxing than television.

Relief from Boredom

There were six respondents in the discussion groups who enjoyed reading the book as a time filler, a relief from boredom. Generally, these women were older, having grown children, or retired, with few leisure or work-related activities. Household chores were the major tasks to be completed during the day. Others, living alone, read to keep themselves occupied and less lonely. "I get bored during the day and I have time. It gives me something to do besides eat." Several of these women considered themselves 'addicted', reading 40-100 romance novels per month.

Knowledge

Six respondents reported learning new information as a result of reading the story. Some found the vocabulary and descriptions of other countries rather exotic and informative. The Spanish setting in this story was appealing, giving the participants the flavor of a foreign country without much detail. The islands, the scenery, and particularly, the food, were mentioned as new information gained.

> "The only thing I liked was learning about the islands."

"The story took you somewhere. A lot of these books do I guess. You can learn a lot about different places."

"I'd like to get some of the recipes."

To several respondents, virtually any reading, regardless of the specific content, was a learning activity. Responses like "I feel like I'm exercising my mind" or "at least I'm reading and not watching TV" indicated the priority of reading to other leisure activities as a potential growth experience. Two women in these groups actually read in order to become future writers of romance.

The vast majority of women, however, viewed the book as entertainment, analogous to soap operas on television. On the whole, the story was described as shallow, simplistically written, mass-produced but rather enjoyable and fun to read. "These books don't teach you anything--but then, they weren't really meant to."

Conclusions

Why women seek romance fiction and the kinds of experiences they derive from it, has been the focus of our study. We have attempted to describe the phenomenon from a functional standpoint; that is, an analysis of how these materials fit into women's lives and fulfill their needs. This uses and

gratifications perspective focuses on the manner in which the individual uses specific content. The assumption is that the social and psychological attributes of the reader shape one's use of the material.

It was clear from our analysis that romance novels appeared to serve multiple functions for the reader. These functions were determined by the reader's purposes and needs. In this respect, the readers controlled the reading experience. Some read the book focusing on the chronology of events in the story. Others read it selectively, skimming for the love scenes or sections dealing with conflicts between the major characters. Some women identified with Stacy, the heroine, seeing themselves in similar situations; others enjoyed the fantasy-like nature of the story. The readers' predispositions clearly appeared to condition the interpretation of what was read. The power of the book and its effects were dependent on the energies exerted by the reader.

But the complexity of women's responses to romances has not been sufficiently acknowledged. Beyond these individual responses, the discussions reflected on a number of important women's issues. Growing pressures to achieve and at the same time maintain a home encouraged women to seek an escape from the real world. These books offered a social function, a legitimate retreat from the responsibilities of one's immediate

environment.

This form of escape, however, may have negative consequences. By inhibiting conscious reflection, women may be encouraged to absorb these materials uncritically, reinforcing stereotypes and prejudices. Modeleski theorizes that Harlequins, in presenting a heroine who escapes inner conflicts, inevitably increase the reader's own conflicts, thus creating a greater dependence on this type of material (1983). Nelson suggests that these fantasies support the notion that despite success and maturity, women are still incomplete without the love of a dominant male. The fantasy confirms an implicit message, reinforcing the psychological need to avoid independence (1983).

Youth and beauty are key characteristics of the heroine in romance novels. These women are perpetually naive, never appearing to grow older or, for that matter, wiser. These women never experience loneliness, boredom, or the fears of aging. Yet we know the readers of romance do have these concerns. Whether these fantasies drain off some of the discontent resulting from the hard blows of socialization or whether they build up frustration, making adjustment more difficult is clearly an important issue. That these materials could lead women to further withdrawl from the complexities of the real world should be addressed by further research.

The cultural shift from traditional female roles to new career options and opportunities has not been an easy transition for many women. Romance fiction offers a sense of relief, something that remains stable in a world of change. But whether these books contribute or impede that transitional process is a subject for further functional analysis. One issue is clear however. If these books are in fact indicative of the concerns of our society, women today are still in the process of springing free.

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Table 1

Profile of Focus Group Participants

Variable	No.
Age	
18-20	4
21-30	11
31-40	36
41-50	15
51-60	6
Marital Status	
Single	11
Married	45
Divorced or Separated	13
Widowed	3
Education	
High School	23
Some college	7
College Degree	27
Post-graduate	15
Occupation	
Professional	24
Semi-skilled	23
Housewife	17
Student	6
Retired	2

Variable	No.
Reading Habits	
No. of Books read per month (other than romance)	
None	11
1-2	32
3-6	22
7 or more	7
Romance Formula fiction reading per month	
1-4	23
5-10	24
10 or more	25
Magazines per month	
None	6
1-2	18
3-6	35
7 or more	13
Newspapers	
Every day	49
Sometimes	9
Seldom	6
Never	8
Television Viewing per week	
0-10	29
11-20	24
21-30	13
31-40	2
41-	4